

Redefining the Character Arc through Berger & Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality*

Michael Welles Schock (Portland, Oregon, USA)

Panel 2

Tuesday 16 November 5pm

Abstract

One of the defining characteristics of a Western film narrative is the “Character Arc,” the course of psychological transformation undergone by the protagonist in response to dramatic events. While discussions on the Character Arc traditionally center on the notion of a “flaw” in need of “correction,” these value judgment-based analyses struggle to adequately cover the range of personal qualities altered in any narrative, do not explain the psychological processes through which internal changes occur, and, most significantly, fail to consider what factors determine qualities to be “flawed” or “correct” in the first place. Using Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s *The Social Construction of Reality*, the Character Arc may be better understood as a movement of the protagonist’s “subjective reality” into greater or lesser congruence with an “objective reality” of the diegetic world. According to Berger and Luckmann, successful socialization creates a symmetry between an individual’s subjective reality (the personal apprehension of the world and its proper norms) and the objective reality of the individual’s environment (the *social consensus* regarding the rules, structures, and role expectations of the shared world). Cinematic protagonists begin in a state of subjective misalignment with the drama’s primary or secondary spheres of action, resulting in a psycho-social dissonance which hampers their operational abilities. A successful Character Arc then may be defined as a realignment of the protagonist’s subjectivity into greater congruence with the requirements of the story’s objective reality, typically accomplished through dramatic scenarios analogous to Berger and Luckmann’s processes of therapy, secondary socialization, or alternation. Redefining the Character Arc thusly may then clarify the Arc’s relation to other narrative structures, as well as the Arc’s contribution to the story’s expression of social meaning.

Bio

Michael Welles Schock lives in Portland, Oregon. He is the author of *Screenwriting Down to the Atoms* and *Screenwriting & The Unified Theory of Narrative*. He is a recent graduate of the Reed College Master’s program with an academic interest in the dialectic relationships between cultural ideologies and popular narratives. He currently teaches online screenwriting courses through Portland Community College.